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AUTHOR Stromquist, Nelly P.
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ABSTRACT

By the year 2000, it is estimated that there will be 1 billion illiterates, 98% of whom will be in developing regions. Oral traditions and the preponderance of local languages and dialects are among the reasons the situation is so widespread. Illiteracy is linked to contextual factors in which social class distinctions, linguistic affiliations, general levels of socioeconomic development, and marginalization of certain groups play important and mutually supportive roles. However, women comprise more illiterates, representing 63% of all illiterates in 1983, up from 58% in 1960. The subordination of women is related to the sexual division of labor and the control of women's sexuality, which in turn affect women's participation in literacy programs. Illiteracy is also higher in rural areas, again related to the sexual division of labor. Various international studies are reported that document the benefits of literacy for women, and constraints of existing literacy programs are discussed. Implications of the International Literacy Year are described. It is concluded that efforts to enable poor and marginal women to become literate will need the pressure of people committed to large-scale social change. Contains 29 references. (LB) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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WOMEN AND LITERACY: PROMISES AND CONSTRAINTS

Nelly P. Stromquist
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA 90089-0031

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Illiteracy is generally considered to be a major impediment to the understanding of one's world and to the securing a good place in it. Its role as a prerequisite for the acquisition of other skills and the development of more rational attitudes (Myrdal, 1972; Bhola, 1984) is universally accepted. In today's rapidly advancing technological society, the written word has become the dominant mode of complex communication; those without the ability to read and write will be condemned to assume the lowest roles in society.

And yet literacy is far from being eliminated throughout the world. It is estimated that in less than 10 years from now, the world will have one billion illiterates, 98 percent of whom will continue to be in developing regions.

The causes for illiteracy among the general population are varied. In African countries, the high illiteracy rates are primarily a function of their recent transitions from oral to written societies. After independence in the 1960's many African countries vigorously expanded their educational systems; nonetheless, older generations could not benefit from this expansion. And even though schools have become more accessible, many young people still have no access to schooling or else withdraw from it before attaining permanent literacy skills (Unesco, 1990).[1] Moreover, the numerous languages spoken in African countries have impeded a smooth passage to the acquisition of reading and writing since literacy programs, for a variety of political and practical reasons, are most often offered only in the official or national tongue--a fact that

eliminates many vernacular speakers or which makes it particularly difficult for them to acquire literacy skills.

Countries such as India and China--which together account for 56 per cent of the world illiterates--have old civilizations with well-established official written languages. However, these are also countries where the existence of numerous local languages and dialects, large and scattered rural populations, and rigid social roles made it difficult for lower socioeconomic and rural people to have access to education. China has made significant progress since its socialist revolution in 1949. Its rates went down from 80-90 percent at that time to 26 percent today, but the current absolute numbers are overwhelming, comprising approximately 71 million illiterates.

In other regions of the world, including Latin America and advanced industrialized countries in Europe and North America, the problem of literacy is not linked to the dominance of oral traditions as in Africa but rather to the existence of poverty and the sometimes deliberate marginalization of certain ethnic and linguistic groups. In Latin America, most of the illiterates are the rural poor, such as those in the northeastern states of Brazil (a country which accounts for 44 percent of the illiterates in that continent), or those who comprise the indigenous, non-Spanish speaking populations of Guatemala, Bolivia, and Peru. In most of these cases, the illiterates coexist with more advanced social and economic sectors but have not benefited from educational programs because their respective governments have seldom devoted the time and resources to produce

literacy programs that respect their cultural and linguistic differences, or that recognize their socioeconomic needs.

In industrialized countries, particularly the U.S. and western European countries, illiterates and functional illiterates tend to prevail among immigrant workers or those groups which because of their ethnic affiliation have not been accepted into mainstream society, or which have to some extent resisted such integration. Thus, Hispanics and Blacks in the U.S., and Turks, Moroccans, and Tunisians in Western Europe have large proportions of illiterates within their groups.

As can be surmised, illiteracy is far from being a mere technical problem, i.e., the inability to decode and encode the written word. It is linked to contextual factors in which social class distinctions, linguistic affiliations, general levels of socioeconomic development, and marginalization of certain groups play important and mutually supportive roles.

While there is diversity in the causes that operate in any given country, a persistent phenomenon observed in most societies is that women comprise the majority of illiterates.[2] Moreover, the numbers of illiterate women have been increasing not only in absolute but also in relative terms: according to UNESCO data they represented 63 percent of the illiterates in 1983, up from 58 percent in 1960. Two out of every three adult women in Africa and one of every two in Asia are illiterate. In the African and Asian areas there is a literacy gap of 21 percentage points in favor of men (Table 1), a gap that clearly spells out economic and social inequality for many women.

Table 1. **UNESCO Estimates of Illiteracy Rates by Gender, 1985**

Region	Gender		Gender Gap
	Female	Male	
Developed countries	2.6	1.7	0.9
Developing countries	48.9	27.9	21.0
Africa	64.5	43.3	21.2
Asia	47.4	25.6	21.8
Latin America/Caribbean	19.2	15.3	3.9

Source: UNESCO. Compendium of Statistics on Illiteracy, No. 30. Paris: Office of Statistics, UNESCO, 1988.

Why are there more illiterate women than men? Lind, a long-time observer of literacy programs, notes that neither adult literacy studies nor "women in development" studies have focused on women's literacy (1989). Literacy programs have always been the stepchildren of formal educational systems, with funds for adult education often representing between 1 and 3 percent of the national education budgets (King, 1988; Torres, 1990a).

Understanding the Subordination of Women

From a theoretical perspective, the conditions of women's illiteracy can be easily explained in the context of women's overall inferior status in society. For a variety of historical and technological reasons, industrialization brought with it a division of social life into "public" and "private" spheres. Soon, a patriarchal ideology that defined women as inferiors and subordinate to men developed in most countries. This ideology was promptly codified in the laws of the emerging nation-states through regulations affecting institutions such as the family, work, land ownership, and voting rights. Although these institutions have undergone modification over time, the two

essential mechanisms for the persistence of patriarchal ideologies--the sexual division of labor and the control of women's sexuality by men--continue in effect. Although these forces are substantially modified by class position, the country's level of technological development, and cultural beliefs, the influence of gender is strong and remarkably stable across societies.

1. The Sexual Division of Labor

According to ILO statistics, women account for two-thirds of the working hours in the world. Poor women in rural areas perform heavy and arduous tasks daily to ensure family subsistence. In Africa, women provide 60 to 80 percent of the labor in food production and a considerable contribution to cash agricultural production (Dey, 1984; Seager and Olson, 1986). In Asia and Latin America men contribute a greater share than in Africa to agricultural work but the domestic burden of women remains considerable. Given the demands of rural domestic life in many developing countries--which includes walking long distances to obtain water and wood for fuel, growing subsistence crops and processing foods that require a considerable investment of physical energy and time, and facing pregnancy and related illnesses with minimal of medical technologies--women in rural areas face a daily existence that is indisputably more demanding in terms of time and effort than that experienced by men.

2. Control of Women's Sexuality

In addition to the sexual division of labor that places poor women in inescapable domestic servitude, men's control of women's sexuality places additional constraints on women's lives. This

sexuality control--which operates mainly in Asian and Latin American countries--is manifested by strict supervision of women's movement outside the home and of the friendships they develop with members of the opposite sex. In many societies, it is also manifested by the withdrawal ~~from~~ of daughters from school as soon as they reach puberty for fear that the young girls may lose their virginity.

A more serious manifestation of the control of women's sexuality is wife beating, which creates among women an attitude of conflict avoidance, which in turn produces a reluctance to engage in any action that might trigger the husband's attack.[3] That this may bear on decisions such as attendance of literacy classes has been documented through life-history methods (see, for instance, Rockhill, 1986). The existence of intensive domestic work coupled with conflictual family dynamics renders literacy an unattainable dream for a large number of women and merely a dream for some of their children--particularly their daughters, who early in life tend to be assigned the same domestic and subsistence roles their mothers perform.

Control of women's sexuality affects their participation in literacy programs because often the places available for classes are considered "unsuitable" in terms of safety and accessibility for women. Reports from India indicate that obstacles imposed by family members, particularly husbands and in-laws, prevent women from participating in literacy programs. The experience of a recent national literacy campaign in Ecuador detected similar effects (Torres, 1990b).

These two fundamental causes, the sexual division of labor and the control by men of women's sexuality, are socially-constructed realities. They are so by virtue of social understandings rather than because these are the only ways in which societies can exist. In traditional societies, and to a surprising degree even in modern nations, women are defined primarily as mothers and wives rather than autonomous citizens or workers. Women attain legitimacy when they marry and form families. Subsequent legitimacy is gained when they produce children, especially sons.

Patriarchal ideologies are generally supported by religio-cultural norms, even though within a given religion variations may be found as a result of historical differences that led to differing interpretations of sacred texts. Islamism and Hinduism tend to be more gender-restrictive than either Christianity or Buddhism regarding social norms. In India, for instance, teachings by Manu--the law-giver in Hinduism--make women non-eligible for all scholastic activities. The two countries in East Asia with the lowest rates of female literacy and the highest gender gap in literacy are Muslim (Tilak, 1990). Confucianism, a cohesive set of moral precepts, is also highly oppressive of women and its legacy is still evident in rural areas of today's socialist China.

Women and Literacy

Not only is literacy higher among women than men, but it is higher in less industrialized and agrarian societies than in urban societies. One explanation for the low levels of literacy

of women in non-industrial societies is that in these societies the maternal roles do not require high levels of education. Literacy indeed may not be necessary if the main reproductive and productive tasks women carry out (i.e., having babies, raising children, managing a low-budget household, growing subsistence crops) can be learned through informal, oral-tradition methods.

In all countries, illiteracy rates are higher in rural than in urban areas. Unesco data for 15 Latin American countries (CEAAL, 1990) show that rural areas have greater levels of illiteracy than urban areas regardless of sex, although women have a slightly greater disadvantage compared to men (a 27.5 percent illiteracy gap exists between urban and rural women compared to a 25.4 percent gap between urban and rural men. It is striking, however, to observe that the gender gap in rural areas almost doubles when compared to that in urban areas (6.3 vs. 12.0 percent points). The disadvantage of rural women is most likely due to the sexual division of labor that places upon them major burdens for domestic work, subsistence production, and various family responsibilities.

With the expansion of schooling, poor families today are more inclined than former generations to allow their daughters to be educated. Girls' enrollment rates in primary school is gradually reaching parity with those of boys in many developing countries. Yet, the early withdrawal of girls, as happens in many African and Asian countries, does not allow the retention of literacy skills.[4] Three or four years of schooling characterized by numerous absences do not amount to much education for the girls; thus, a significant loss of literacy skills follows. As

adults, their limited physical mobility, their contacts with mostly women of their own community--who tend to be illiterates like them--and their own socialization into accepting the norm that women do not need as much education as men create a strong mind set among women that further prevents them from seeking basic literacy skills.

The Benefits of Literacy for Women

Do women benefit from access to literacy? There have been relatively few studies measuring the impact of literacy per se (as opposed to levels of schooling), and even fewer studies focusing on literacy while controlling for other confounding variables.

We have substantial evidence about the positive effect of education on a number of family and maternal outcomes, but such studies are based mainly on examinations of the impacts of years of schooling. Nonetheless, it could be inferred that literacy--a critical component of formal education--also offers the same benefits.

In numerous countries, education leads to a decrease in fertility. Apparently this is not the result of literacy per se but rather the greater ability to process the information, a fact that can be inferred from observing that there tends to be a threshold of three-to-four years of schooling for fertility (UN 1983). Not surprisingly, the level of education of women has a threefold stronger effect on fertility than that of men (Cochrane, 1983). Regardless of social class, the more educated a woman is, the fewer children she will have; this effect seems

to be stronger in urban than rural areas. Individual literacy may have more positive effects when the society in which people live is also literate. Cochrane's review of data for 23 countries (1982) found that the relation between literacy and fertility was strongest in societies where the aggregate literacy was at least 40 percent. Moreover, the more educated a woman is, the better will be the health of her children and the greater will be their life expectancy at birth. Educated women have been found to marry at a later age and to provide their children with much more verbal and physical stimulation than women with little or no education; this stimulation is in turn associated with greater cognitive development on the part of the child. Various studies have found more powerful benefits associated with the education of mothers than fathers on outcomes such as improved nutrition of children. The latter effect has an indirect causal chain: mothers with more education tend to enter the labor force in greater numbers; as they earn wages, they spend their income on improving the family diet.

An econometric study of labor force participation, based on 1980s data for 136 countries, found that literate women participate in the labor market 54 percent more than illiterate women. The power of individual literacy per se in explaining labor force participation, however, was very low (4 percent); the researchers argued that this level of explanatory power is frequently found in human capital theories (Psacharopoulos and Tzannatos, 1987). This evidence confirms common understandings of the value of education: it makes educated individuals better

off than uneducated individuals but by itself does not determine economic opportunities.

Studies relating literacy to cognitive and various social outcomes are few in number. Some of the critical mechanisms that account for the literacy-fertility relationship have been found to be knowledge of and access to birth control and increased wife-husband communication. A Nigerian study comparing literate with illiterate women, found that educated mothers have differential maternal behaviors in that they practice less force feeding, talk more to their babies, and use less physical punishment (LeVine, 1982).[5] A study of rural women in Sri Lanka found that illiterate women visited maternal and child health clinics less often, were less inclined to seek immunization against tetanus, had unattended home deliveries, and had higher incidence of prenatal and neonatal mortality among their infants (Jayaweera, 1989).

A study conducted in Nepal found that parental literacy has an impact on student attainment and retention at the primary level, but this study did not distinguish between the mother's and father's literacy (Caillods, 1989). One of the few studies of literacy outcomes, conducted in Kenya (where approximately 70% of the participants in literacy programs were women) found that literacy skills facilitate the acquisition of functional knowledge regarding agriculture, health, and family planning; further, they produce more positive individual attitudes toward innovation (Caillods, 1989).

Those studies which focus on years of schooling as their measurement of education assert that important processes--still

not well documented--materialize through the school and through classroom experiences. They also assert that education allows substantial cognitive growth and that this ability allows women to detect means/ends relationships. If literacy allows cognitive growth, then its effect may be similar to years of schooling. Nonetheless, the point at which literacy makes an impact remains unclear. The ability to read and write as a segmented skill probably is less valuable than literacy skills nurtured by content that conveys to women important messages and perspectives about their social reality. If so, the importance of literacy is really in post-literacy, in the kinds of activities and learning that take place after reading and writing skills are mastered. While the findings are not always unambiguous and positive, the overall results indicate that literate women make better maternal and family decisions and engage in more desirable practices than women who do not have access to the written word. The evidence reviewed above makes it clear that benefits do accrue to women from access to literacy. These benefits have been measured primarily in terms of women's contribution to families and society as presently constituted; in other words, they have been measured in terms of serving the social status quo. Nonetheless, the acquisition of skills to process new and more distant forms of knowledge has a potential that can be channeled to meet women's needs.

The Constraints of Literacy

Literacy is increasingly being recognized as a basic human right. Yet very few governments have conducted serious literacy

programs, much less taken specific measures to help the education of adult women, even though women are recognized--especially after the 1975-85 UN Decade for Women--as intended beneficiaries. Most literacy programs conducted by governments have tended to assume that programs can be designed to serve both men and women simultaneously. Close examination of these programs, however, reveals that they offer little in the line of supportive services for women (e.g., child care services, flexible class schedules, alternative class settings) which would facilitate their attendance. There is little also in terms of instructional methodologies to appeal to adult, generally fatigued and harassed women. While more women than men tend to enroll in literacy classes, this is probably a consequence of the larger numbers of women who are illiterate. At the same time, the participation of women is sporadic and many never complete their programs.

Literacy programs for women have offered limited attention either to the deep causes of women's subordination or to the immediate constraints they face in participating in literacy programs. As a result, these programs tend to solidify the existing social order. The explicit justification for many literacy programs for women is that women need to be "incorporated into development efforts." This argument implies that women are not part of the economy and society. It would be more correct to state that women are not incorporated under equal conditions. The problem of uneducated women is not their failure to contribute but rather that their contribution takes place under exploitative and oppressive conditions. The discourse

about helping women "to contribute more fully to economic and social development" (World Bank, 1989, p. 60) is misguided in that (a) it does not recognize the current contribution being made by women, and (b) does not examine the conditions under which further contributions might be exacted.

When governments do offer literacy programs for women, the similarity of their objectives is remarkable. Common features are their content emphasis on family health, child care, nutrition, and family planning. To a lesser extent information for income generation is being introduced, but even here these revenue producing activities are designed so that they are totally compatible with women's traditional domestic and family roles. Most damaging of all is the fact that curricular content of many literacy programs convey traditional notions of male superiority. These messages are commonly disguised under the notion of "complementary" roles, whereby men assume economic and political responsibilities in public life and women concentrate their energy and devotion to husband and children.

In the governmental discourse that puts a premium on the provision of literacy for women, it is clear that literacy for women is advocated as a instrument to render them better mothers and house managers. Less often does one hear that literacy can also help women become independent and better citizens. Many of the literacy programs for women today center on giving women literacy skills so that they can read information on child care, nutrition, hygiene, family planning, pre- and post-natal care, and water-pump management. While these programs are described as "functional literacy," it is clear that it is a functionality

conceived along traditional, narrow roles for women.

This emphasis on social and biological reproduction has been observed in numerous programs, from Indonesia and Pakistan (Hafeez, 1983) to Argentina (Braslavsky, 1988). Evidence from the curricula of various governmental literacy programs for women confirms the reproductive objectives of these programs. The case of India is particularly relevant. India is a country with long-standing literacy programs, including some centering on women. The National Adult Education Program initiated in 1978 specifically identified women as intended beneficiaries and sought to provide them with knowledge of their rights and responsibilities in society, with an understanding of the manifest and concealed causes of women's oppression, with skills for economic viability, and with knowledge in health, child care, nutrition, family planning, etc. Several studies of the implementation of the NAEP coincide in describing this program as one which has emphasized the traditional, reproductive, role of women by concentrating on drilling them in nutrition, health, and family planning (Dighe, 1989). The primers used in some of the NAEP literacy classes for women reveal a content that would perpetuate women's dependence on men and leaves gender relations at home and in society untouched. Content analysis of the reader used in the state of Gujarat found a focus on marriage, housework, childcare, and family planning that portrayed women in the roles of wives and mothers in a happy nuclear patriarchal family. The income-generating activities proposed for women built on "feminine" home-based activities such as sewing,

embroidery, and preparing and processing food, "thereby ensuring that the domestic sphere is not disturbed" (Patel, 1987). A curriculum for literacy programs that heavily emphasizes a home economics content has also been identified in the National Literacy Program of Botswana (Gaborone, 1989).

Literacy primers reproduce gender relations also by omitting discussion of important knowledge. In Tanzania, a socialist country well known for its inspiring educational philosophies, primers do not mention the domestic labor of women, their workload in the family, and issues of sexuality and sexual harassment (Kweka, 1989).

Information about basic needs and skills in nutrition, child care, and hygiene is important. It will help rural and poor women reduce their hours of toil and suffering. On the other hand, if the messages conveyed to women gravitate essentially around reproductive roles, the women's social definition as mothers and wives will be consolidated, not transformed.

Literacy is not the main preoccupation of indigent women. Women demand it after a successful income-generating experience. But there are only few such projects in existence. Many of these projects operate in minuscule scales, just enough to have something to report on the matter. Two countries that have income-generating projects on a massive scale are Nepal and India.

We referred earlier to the programs' ability to respond to women's needs. The notion of "needs" requires discussion. Government officials usually describe women's needs as those that derive from their traditionally feminine roles. From a feminist

perspective, women's needs are those that link women to processes of social questioning and transformation.

At the program level there emerges a tension between providing women knowledge for ordinary life (knowledge that addresses basic survival needs tied to social and biological reproduction), and knowledge needed to change social relations (conscientization, political mobilization, organization). There is much to be said about improving the knowledge that women receive in necessary skills for subsistence also, particularly those skills needed for increasing agricultural productivity. A study by Eisemon and Nyamete (1990) found that women cultivators in Kenya, even though they had literacy skills and were able to read instructions for applying agricultural chemicals to their crops, still did not have the ability to utilize such inputs safely and effectively. The researchers maintained that this was the case because instruction in science and technology would have to improve to enable women farmers to understand basic scientific principles.

As an implementation strategy, it would make sense to start literacy programs that appeal to women's conventional roles and thus immediate responsibilities. But progressively these programs should expand to include knowledge that is more emancipatory in nature--moving from basic needs to political information.

The question that now emerges is, how willing will the State be to endorse such programs? The State has responded to programs with emancipatory content in either of two ways: (a) by

failing to implement such programs altogether, or (b) by conducting one or two of them as progressive pilot programs but delaying their large-scale implementation.

Women need literacy programs that will make them aware of their subordinate status in society and in the family. They need programs that promote in them the questioning of the prevailing sexual division of labor and the norms that control their sexuality and thus their physical and mental freedom. Literacy, then, for women has to provide access not only to the written word but also access to the information they need to transform their world. These programs, therefore, will have to be designed so that not only the content but also the process of knowledge acquisition is emancipatory. A process that promotes an active role for women will have to include them in the design and implementation of literacy programs. This is a notion to which many government bureaucrats react with ridicule and which few of them are willing to undertake. Yet, a woman who is not empowered will do little with her new literacy.

Illiteracy is a social condition that reflects structural inequalities and the discrimination built into social institutions. A major constraint to the provision of women's literacy lies in the material benefits that women's illiteracy produce for others. Women's work at home and in the informal sector reduces the price of labor in general and facilitates capital accumulation in free-market systems. Therefore, women's role in the informal sector and in household labor, far from being a "holdout from capitalist modernization" is an important element in the modernization process (Draper, 1985), making

changes in their socioeconomic position difficult as it will call for a complex realignment of forces.

Who can provide the literacy programs women need? Certainly not the State, which relies on the traditional family to keep society stable. Because of the constraints imposed on gender issues by some religions it is doubtful that religious schools such as the Maktab and the Madrasah could provide women and their daughters with literacy knowledge that is emancipatory in nature. The possibility for change will come from the women themselves, through local programs willing to undertake small-scale but radical steps to transform society at both micro (household) and macro (community) levels. The role of NGOs, and particularly women-run NGOs, will be important here. Their possibilities for State support are very small; hence, this is an area where external funding sources may have to play a crucial role.

The International Literacy Year

That most governments have done little to address the problem of literacy is widely recognized. In recent years, initiatives outside the State have occurred to encourage greater attention to the problem of literacy and to put pressures on governments to act. Several international and national NGOs in developed countries have conducted efforts since 1981 to have the United Nations proclaim a year devoted to literacy. This finally happened in 1989 when the UN General Assembly declared 1990 the International Literacy Year (ILY) and asked Unesco, as the leading international agency on education, to coordinate the activities for the year.

The objectives of the ILY specifically identify "women and girls" among the intended beneficiaries of literacy. The objectives also seek to "increase action by the governments of member states afflicted by illiteracy or functional illiteracy to eliminate these problems," and to "increase popular participation particularly through activities of governmental and nongovernmental organizations, voluntary associations and community groups" (Unesco, 1990). While these are noble aims, those seeking the advancement of women will have to ensure that governments allocate substantial funds for literacy and post-literacy programs, that these programs do not continue their patriarchal message to women, and that they do not construe "popular participation of NGOs" to mean unpaid, voluntary efforts.

While the renewed efforts to take place under the ILY are welcomed, it remains unclear what level of support the various governments will offer and how many will respond. The historical evidence regarding literacy programs--in terms of the resources and effort devoted to them--clearly reveals that literacy is one of the weakest priorities of many governments. It is also evident that, despite the concerns governments express regarding illiteracy, various groups in any given social system draw significant benefits (mostly in low salaries and a captive labor force) from illiterates.

It is also unclear how many of the international development agencies are willing to support the renewed literacy efforts with levels of funding appropriate to the nature and magnitude of the

problem. The establishment of a world literacy clearinghouse is likely to give high visibility to the donor agency funding such a center. But supporting a center at the proposed cost of $250,000 per year hardly solves the problem of many literacy programs, which are run with a minimum of pedagogical support, which are seldom able to include stable post-literacy efforts, and which rarely--if ever--can provide material and logistic support for women to become literate. And yet, under present economic conditions, the progressive development agencies of the North represent the best hope for groups committed to literacy with empowerment.

The NGO community is very enthusiastic about the ILY and ready to increase its efforts on literacy. For many of the grass-roots and national organizations working on literacy, the ILY will bring visibility, additional external support, and perhaps a greater support from their national governments.

The basic challenge for women's literacy will be to conduct literacy programs that are effective in content and process while other forces in society continue to operate in ways that preserve the traditional roles for women. This is not a technical challenge to be solved through ingenious methods.

It would be a mistake to see illiteracy as mainly an individual's failure to develop such skills. The emergence of illiteracy conditions is highly embedded in social definitions of the role of women in society. These social definitions, part and parcel of patriarchal ideologies, are reenacted on a day-to-day basis. This fact--the quotidian nature of their reenactment--makes patriarchal ideologies most difficult to question and

change. The problem of illiteracy among women therefore is best understood as a manifestation of gender inequality in society, which necessitates a solution that goes far beyond educational strategies.

Efforts to enable poor and marginal women to become literate will need the pressure of people committed to social change on numerous fronts which must cover employment, marriage and household relations, legal rights, and increased primary education. If literacy for women does not bring with it an emancipatory content and participatory methods of instruction, there is a greater danger that the State may be using literacy to lock women in their breeding place--not to release them from subordinate positions but to indoctrinate them more effectively into asymmetrical gender relations.

NOTES

[1]Unesco (1990) estimates that there are about 100 million school-age children, mainly in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, who do not have schooling places. Today, 23 developing countries still have primary gross enrollment rates below 70 percent.

[2]There are some exceptions in the pattern of women's majority in illiteracy. These are usually small countries characterized by heavy male outmigration (Lesotho) or a preponderance of female heads of households (Jamaica and a few other Caribbean islands).

[3]Wife beating is a widespread social practice. Formal studies of its incidence in the U.S. have declared it the "single greatest source of injury to women." Wife beating in certain developing countries, such as Papua New Guinea, affects as much as two-thirds of the adult women.

[4]In India, for instance, 75 percent of the out-of-school population in ages 6-14 are girls.

[5]This study, conducted by Barbara Lloyd and associates, focused on Yoruba women, also found that educated mothers tended less to discourage aggression, to practice less the post-partum taboo of their society, and to engage in shorter length breast-feeding than the illiterate, "traditional" mothers--which suggests that not all behaviors associated with literacy are positive.

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